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ABSTRACT

William Blount's journey from the drawing rooms of North Carolina where he led the fight for ratification of the U.S. Constitution to the rude frontier of Tennessee where he served as chairman for that state's constitutional convention illustrates the various political and economic promises of independence. This booklet on Blount is one in a series on Revolutionary War soldiers who later signed the U.S. Constitution. The booklet reviews his involvement with North Carolina's Whig leaders, his military service as a regimental paymaster, his public service after the War as North Carolina's representative to the Constitutional Convention, and his involvement in the politics of Tennessee. Personal data about Blount and a bibliographic essay of further readings are also included. (DJC)

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SO 019 478

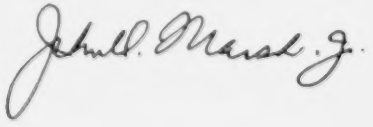
William Blount

Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution
A Bicentennial Series

Introduction

In September 1987 the United States commemorates the bicentennial of the signing of the Constitution. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Their experiences in that conflict made them deeply conscious of the need for a strong central government that would prevail against its enemies, yet one that would safeguard the individual liberties and the republican form of government for which they had fought. Their solution is enshrined in the Constitution. The President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the nation's military forces. But it is the Congress that has the power to raise and support those forces, and to declare war. The Founding Fathers established for all time the precedent that the military, subordinated to the Congress, would remain the servant of the Republic. That concept is the underpinning of the American military officer. These twenty-two men were patriots and leaders in every sense of the word: they fought the war, they signed the Constitution, and they forged the new government. They all went on to careers of distinguished public service in the new Republic. Their accomplishments should not be forgotten by those who enjoy the fruits of their labors. Nor should we forget the fortieth man whose name appears on the Constitution. The Secretary was the twenty-third Revolutionary veteran in the Convention, who continued his service to the nation as one of its first civil servants.

This pamphlet was prepared by the U.S. Army Center of Military History with the hope that it will provide you with the background of a great American; stimulate you to learn more about him; and help you enjoy and appreciate the bicentennial.



John O. Marsh, Jr.
Secretary of the Army

WILLIAM BLOUNT
North Carolina

William Blount, who represented North Carolina at the Constitutional Convention, personified America's enduring fascination with its frontier. Raised in the aristocratic tradition of the seaboard planter society, Blount faithfully served his native state in elective office and under arms during the Revolution. Like George Washington, Blount became fascinated with the boundless opportunities of the west. He was drawn to the trans-Allegheny territories, where he eventually played a major role in the founding of the state of Tennessee.

Blount's journey from the drawing rooms of the east to the rude frontier cabins of his adopted state not only illustrates the lure of the region to a man of business and political acumen but also underscores the opportunities provided by the creation of a strong central government that could protect and foster westward expansion. Indeed, Blount had led the fight in North Carolina for ratification of the new Constitution because he, like many of his fellow veterans, had come to realize that the various political and economic promises of independence could only be fulfilled by a strong, effective union of all the states.

THE PATRIOT

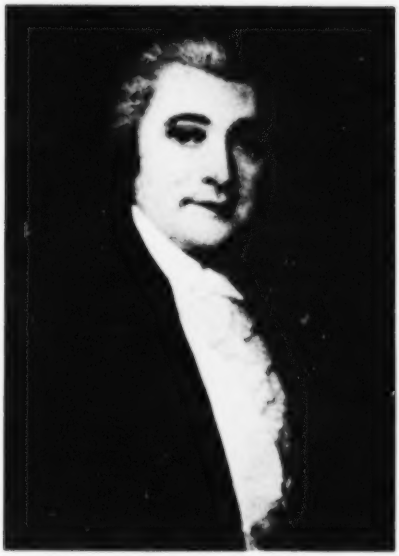
Blount was born into a world of wealth and privilege. The oldest son in a family of distinguished merchants and planters who owned extensive properties along the banks of the Pamlico River, he was educated by private tutors, and with his brothers he moved with ease into a career managing some of his father's mercantile interests. At this stage of his life, Blount showed little sympathy for the aspirations of the rough-hewn settlers in the western regions of the colony. Influenced by the Whig planter class, he opposed the demands of the Regulators, a loose organization of western populists who sought greater economic and political parity with the eastern planters through reform of the colony's election laws, tax and land regulations, and judicial system. When these demands turned to physical confrontation, Blount joined a force of loyal militia, which in May 1771 confronted some 2,000 mostly unarmed Regulators on the banks of the Alamance River. Although the largely bloodless battle that followed saw the defeat of the Regulators and the execution of their leaders, many of their reforms were eventually adopted by the North Carolina assembly.

The Whig leaders responsible for defeating the Regulators would later ally themselves with their old western foes in the fight for independence in North Carolina. The former Regulators turned against Britain when a royal proclamation in 1774 closed off western expansion; the Whigs, representing the interests of the eastern seaboard, opposed the efforts of the royal governor to reassert British control over local affairs, which for nearly a century had been exercised by the colonial assembly. Both groups were represented in the assembly, and the growing political tension between that body and an increasingly autocratic royal governor led the colony to cast its lot with the patriot cause. As leading members of the moderate faction of North Carolina's Whig party, the Blounts played an important role in the move toward independence.

THE SOLDIER

When differences with the royal governor moved beyond any hope of reconciliation, the North Carolina assembly began recruiting troops in the summer of 1775, ultimately contributing ten regiments of infantry and several separate companies of artillery and cavalry to the Continental Army. This mobilization attracted many prominent citizens to the colors, including six members of the Blount family. As part of a general reorganization of the state's military units in December 1776, William Blount accepted appointment as the regimental paymaster for the 3d North Carolina Regiment. Although a regimental paymaster was not a commissioned officer with command responsibility on the battlefield, Blount served under a warrant on the regimental staff and drew the same pay and allowances as a captain. He also participated in the regiment's march north in the late spring of 1777 when it joined Washington's main army in defense of Philadelphia against Sir William Howe's royal forces.

Washington planned to defend the American capital from behind a series of fortifications along the Delaware River. When Howe chose instead to land at the head of the Chesapeake Bay and move overland, Washington quickly drew up new defensive positions along the Brandywine River, but when Howe outmaneuvered him in a battle on 11 September, he was forced to withdraw. Less than a month later, Washington went on the offensive, counterattacking at Germantown, near Philadelphia. Repeating surprise tactics used at Trenton, the continentals enjoyed initial success, smashing several battalions of British light infantry before coordination broke down between the assault columns. Rather than risk defeat, Washington called off the attack and safely withdrew. The North Carolina forces, although reduced by disease and other causes to an understrength brigade, served as the reserve force, successfully screening the retreating continentals. Blount and his comrades had participated in one



Oil on canvas, by Washington Cooper (c. 1850), courtesy Tennessee State Museum, Tennessee Historical Society Collection.

of the key battles of the war. By demonstrating Washington's willingness to fight and the Continental Army's recuperative powers, the battle convinced France that the Americans were in the war to the end and directly influenced France's decision to support the Revolution openly.

Following its first major campaign, the greatly weakened North Carolina Line began a series of reorganizations to recoup its fighting strength. Blount returned home to become chief paymaster of state forces and later deputy paymaster general for North Carolina. For the next three years he remained intimately involved in the demanding task of recruiting and reequipping forces to be used in support both of Washington's main army in the north and of separate military operations in defense of the southern tier of states.

The fall of Charleston, South Carolina, to British forces under Sir Henry Clinton in May 1780 was a major defeat for the patriot cause. During that battle the last of North Carolina's continentals were captured, exposing the state to invasion. Once again the state was forced to join its neighbors in the difficult task of raising new units, this time to counter a force of British, Hessian, and Loyalist troops under General Charles Cornwallis. Blount not only helped organize these citizen-soldiers but also took to the field with them. His North Carolina unit served under General Horatio Gates, who hastily engaged Cornwallis in a bloody battle at Camden, South Carolina. On August 16 Gates deployed his units—his continentals to the right, the North Carolina and Virginia militia on his left flank—and ordered an advance. The American

soldiers were exhausted from weeks of marching and insufficient rations. Furthermore, the militia elements had only recently joined with the regulars, and disciplined teamwork between the two components had not yet been achieved. Such teamwork was especially necessary before hastily assembled militia units could be expected to perform the intricate infantry maneuvers of eighteenth century linear warfare. While the continentals easily advanced against the enemy, the militia quickly lost their cohesion in the smoke and confusion, and their lines crumbled before the counterattacking British. Cornwallis then shifted all his forces against the continentals. In less than an hour Gates' army had been lost to the patriot cause. This second defeat in the South, the result of inadequate preparations, provided the young Blount a lesson that would stand him in good stead in later years. It also marked the end of Blount's active military career.

THE STATESMAN

Following the defeat at Camden, Blount resigned his military responsibilities to accept a seat in the North Carolina assembly. During the next six years he served in both houses of the legislature, including one term as speaker of its lower house, and represented his state in the Continental Congress. He also served North Carolina as its negotiator with the powerful Indian tribes on its western frontier. Like many of his fellow veterans during this period, Blount had became an investor and speculator in western lands. His developing interest in the economic potential of western expansion as well as his exposure to national issues both as a soldier and as a member of the Continental Congress completed the transformation of this tidewater Whig into an exponent of a strong, stable central government.

Blount expressed these related interests most clearly when he accepted the invitation to represent North Carolina at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Although he did not actively participate in the Convention debates and even expressed reservations about some sections of the final document, Blount signed the Constitution because, as he explained, in a democracy the will of the people, expressed through their elected delegates, should be heard. He actively supported ratification of the Constitution when North Carolina debated the issue in 1789.

In 1790 President Washington chose his old comrade in arms to serve as territorial governor of the trans-Allegheny lands ceded by North Carolina to the new nation. He also appointed Blount to the post of Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern Department. These dual responsibilities tested Blount's political abilities to the utmost, forcing him to balance the expansionist interests of the frontier settlers against the protectionist policies of the

national government toward the Indian tribes. He performed a wide array of tasks extraordinarily well. He negotiated a series of treaties with the powerful tribes of the southern frontier—the Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws. Drawing on his experience in the Revolution, and mindful of the losses that had resulted from poorly prepared militia in that war, he organized the territorial militia, supervising its training and deploying it in conjunction with the militias of neighboring states to protect settlements and punish roving bands of hostile Indians. This combination of diplomacy and force preserved the peace during a period when the Regular Army's single regiment was fully committed to operations in the Northwest Territory. It also won Blount the respect and support of the settlers pouring into the region. After he led Tennessee to full statehood in 1796, serving as chairman of its constitutional convention, he was elected as one of the new state's first United States senators.

Blount's new career proved short-lived. In less than a year his colleagues expelled him from the Senate on charges of conspiring with an agent of the British government. These charges, unconfirmed to this day, connected Blount with a plot to seize control of Spain's possessions in Louisiana and Florida. There was certainly a widespread frustration in the frontier states, and especially in Tennessee, over Spain's continued control of the Mississippi River, on which the economic survival of the region depended. Whatever his connection with the affair, Blount's popularity in Tennessee remained undiminished. In 1798 he was elected to the state legislature, where he served with honor as speaker of the Senate until his death.

Like many men of his generation, Blount was transformed by his experiences in the War for Independence. It caused him to moderate his initial sense of loyalty to one class and section, allowing him to become a leader in the westward expansion of the nation. It also transformed him into a strong nationalist by convincing him that only a strong central government could harness the potential for nationhood that he saw around him.

The Congress shall have Power . . .
To raise and support Armies . . . ;
To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia . . . ;

ARTICLE I, Section 8.

Personal Data

BIRTH: 6 April 1749, at "Rosefield," Bertie County, North Carolina*
OCCUPATION: Planter and Land Speculator
MILITARY SERVICE:
Staff Officer (Paymaster), Continental Army—4 years
PUBLIC SERVICE:
Continental Congress—4 years
Territorial Governor—6 years
United States Senator—1 year
DEATH: 21 March 1800, at Knoxville, Tennessee
PLACE OF INTERMENT: First Presbyterian Church Cemetery, Knoxville, Tennessee

*In 1752 the English-speaking world adopted the Gregorian calendar, thereby adding 11 days to the date. Thus Blount's date of birth was recorded in 1749 as 26 March.

Further Readings

Blount has been the subject of two biographies: Marcus J. Wright's *Some Account of the Life and Services of William Blount* (1884) and William H. Masterson's *William Blount* (1954). Biographical information is also contained in Frederick Jackson Turner's "Documents on the Blount Conspiracy, 1795-1797," in the *American Historical Review*, 10 (1905), pp. 574-606, and Peter Force, editor, *American State Papers. Vol. 1: Indian Affairs* (1832). Other books which shed light on the creation of the Constitution and the role of the military in the early history of the nation include Sol Bloom's *The Story of the Constitution* (1937); Don Higginbotham's *The War of American Independence* (1971); Merrill Jensen's *Making of the Constitution* (1979); Richard Kohn's *Eagle and Sword* (1975); Clinton Rossiter's *1787: The Grand Convention* (1966); and Robert K. Wright, Jr.'s *The Continental Army* (1983). Blount's papers are located at the Library of Congress, the Tennessee Historical Society, and the Lyman C. Draper Collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Cover: *Scene of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, by Howard Chandler Christy, courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

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